

The Sardarni Kuljit Kaur Bindra Chair in Sikh Studies
with the Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair in Sikh Musicology
and Hofstra's Religion and Music Departments

Invite you to the
International conference celebrating Gurū Nānak's 550th Birth Anniversary

October 10th, 11th and 12th, 2019
Hofstra University, Hempstead NY

**Gurū Nānak's *Ek-Anek* Vision:
Beyond Relativist and Plural Diversities
of the Musical Word**

The Sardarni Harbans Kaur Chair in Sikh Musicology and the Sardarni Kuljit Kaur Bindra Chair in Sikh Studies jointly organized the international conference on “*Gurū Nānak's Ek-Anek Vision: Beyond Relativist and Plural Diversities of the Musical Word*”, to celebrate the 550th birth anniversary of Gurū Nānak, the founder of the Sikh tradition.

The idea of this conference is built around Gurū Nānak's *Ek-Anek* (One–Many) Vision, in a way to create a platform in which scholars with expertise in Sufi, Bhakti and Sikh cultures gather to explore the *pluriversal* (Mignolo 2018) nature of the Gur-Sikh musical and literary heritage, and the role of the Gurbānī *kīrtan paramparā* in preserving early accounts and forms of these two heterodox traditions.

Fulfilling Hofstra's commitment to foster an inclusive culture, this international and interdisciplinary conference is expected to be an engaging event at both academic and community levels, with performances of Sikh, Bhakti, and Sufi repertoires, as preserved in the Gurū Granth Sāhib, presented by renowned exponents from India: Bhai Baldeep Singh, Prahlad Tipanya and Dhruv Sangari. The conference proceedings will be published in an edited volume.

Themes and Rationale of the Conference

Starting with the analysis of Bhakti, Sufi and Sikh voices, as critically included in the Sikh scriptures, this event aims to explore Gurū Nānak's *pluriversal* vision and the experiential knowledge embodied (Hess 2015), and preserved, in the form of sung poetry through the Gurbānī *kīrtan paramparā*.

The Gur-Sikh texts are composed within Gurū Nānak's vision of *Ek-Anek* as a lived reality: different people, languages, cultures, and traditions all form legitimate expressions and avenues through which truth can occur. The Sikh Gurūs heard the voices of the other as a song echoing *pluriversal* values (Bhagal 2019), forming them into melodies and compositions that could express the complexity of the truth as a heterogenous but coherent sonic form. Rather than an ideological and monolingual truth to convert the other, the Gurū Granth Sāhib's musical form calls for a resonance within and between traditions. The poetic and musical repertoire of Sikh "literature" not only stands as an example for its critically inclusive "interreligious" foundation but also represents a precious testimony of medieval and early-modern devotional song-forms and *rāgas* that musicologists believe to be extinct (Schofield 2018).

This conference aims to critically examine the 'uncolonised' and overlooked musical heritage of the Gurbānī *kīrtan paramparā*, as transmitted to this day in streams that resisted post-Partition homologation (Cassio and Khalsa 2019). Through the Gur-Sikh aural memory, early accounts of Sufi and Bhakti poetries have been preserved in written and oral forms which (as in the case of the Kabir *bānī*) are credited for being the closest – and hence the most 'authentic' – sources available today (Callewaert 2000).

Just as the Gurū Granth Sāhib functions as key reference in these vernacular literatures, likewise, from the early traditions the Gurbānī musical heritage retained unexplored tracks of *rāgas*, compositions, and song-forms that are relevant sources of historical and musicological information. Considered for a long time as a peripheral musical expression (Powers 1980) and as regional variant of mainstream genres (Slawek 1996; Sanyal and Widdess 2004; Beck 2010), the Gurbānī *kīrtan paramparā* carries an alternative narrative that not only challenges historical accounts based on colonially-derived sources and binary paradigms (such as folk–classical, oral–written, subaltern–dominant), but also defies colonial universalism. Thus, the neglected and misunderstood evidence of the Gurū Granth Sāhib urges scholars to rethink the role and impact of the musical Word according to Gurū Nānak's *Ek-Anek* vision that, based on pluriversal thinking, includes marginalinized voices as equally valid. Central in this debate are the notions of 'literacy' and aural-oral knowledge, reassessed through decolonial lenses (Stoller 2007; Ochoa Gautier 2014)

Relevant examples of this kind are the (*dhru*)*pad*-based *kīrtan* forms (such as Gurbānī, Havelī and Padāvalī), that will be analyzed – by contrast and similarities – with the Darbāri dhrupad traditions celebrated in written music literature. Although particular attention will be given to these themes, the conference is not limited to these topics, and we are encouraging scholars to discuss broader issues, such as:

- 1 *Devotional songs as oral narratives of the Self and the Other;*
- 2 *Devotional music literature and multidirectional memories (Rothberg 2009);*
- 3 *Interlaced voices of poets and saints from Sindh, Panjab, Madhya Pradesh, and Bengal;*
- 4 *Eurocentred notion of (music) history versus alternative indigenous narratives;*
- 5 *Critical assessments of Indic & colonial sources on devotional music-s in South Asia;*
- 6 *The impact of national cultural policies on the transmission of traditional repertoires;*
- 7 *Oral and written sources that survived colonial and nationalist narratives.*

The Gurū Granth Sāhib through a Decolonial Frame

At the outset, this conference seeks to counter the reduction of Gurū Nānak’s vision of *Ek-Anek* (“One—Many”; lit. “one—not one”) to either a harbinger of modern relativism or an exemplar of a universalist theology. Indeed, universalism and relativism are recognized here as aspects of a single discourse wherein the frames of “multiculturalism” and “religion” are structures born of the colonial encounter in which Christian nations mediated and negated the differences of indigenous traditions by an inclusive rhetoric of control and assimilation. Mignolo has argued that ‘modernity occluded the pluriversal under the persuasive discourse of the universal’ (2003: 435), such that dominant groups (whether Christian Whites or Hindu Brahmins) ‘found themselves enjoying the epistemic privilege of classifying without being classified’ (in Dabashi 2015: xiv). That is, European universalism (i.e., the self-declared superiority of modern rationalism, western progress and Christian ethics) was masked, and thereby preserved, by the rhetoric of universalism on the one hand (“God”, “democracy”, “reason”) and pluralism on the other (“tolerance”, “multiculturalism”, “freedom”). This is nowhere more clearly illustrated than through the “invention of World religions” (Masuzawa 2005). That the dominant power may choose to tolerate difference ensures that it itself remains undisturbed in its singular command of the power of enunciation and representation. To this day, Article 25 (2)(b) of the Indian secular constitution stipulates that “the reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jain or Buddhist religion.”

Dispensing with European and Indic *vertical* notions of cosmic, linguistic and ritual order, Gurū Nānak's *Ek-Anek* is both horizontally and temporally figured, and as such is inclusive of the other. When Gurū Nānak "sees no other" (*avar-na-dūjā*) this is not to say that all are one unified whole without remainder. Rather it is a move to resist, firstly, the demarcation of a center; and secondly, the casting out of others beyond its periphery (barbarian, *mlechha* et al). *Ek-Anek* is radically committed to inclusion; yet it just as radically disavows the politics of assimilation, contra colonial epistemicide and *shudraization* (Halbfass 1988: 180). It presents a vision of pluriversal heterogeneity.

The pluriversal is horizontal, bottom-up and non-possessable; the universal is vertical and top-down and owned by a dominating group. The pluriversal emphasizes a *particular-particular* relation of being-with-others as co-constitutive, heterogeneous and collaborative; the *universal-particular* operates through a master-slave relation that demands obedience, mimesis and homogeneity. The former concerns experiential engagement, the latter swings from "tolerance" (left) to "zero tolerance" (right). While the pluriversal is inter-cultural and inter-epistemic, the universal is neither.

Ek-Anek, as *Ik-Oankār* (the One Sound-Resonance), then exceeds the constraints of language, whether secular or sacred. Rather it requires multiple grammars and vocabularies in order to approach the pluriversal. It is hence why this conference focuses on music, particularly the diversity of the musical traditions included in the Gurū Granth Sāhib, as a way to directly and differently engage with Gurū Nānak's pluriversal teachings that cannot be named, but only felt, sung and embodied.

The epistemic diversity of Gurū Nānak's *Ek-Anek* vision constructed "a world in which other worlds fit", to borrow the Zapatista motto (Grosfoguel 2012: 99). In this regard the Gurū Granth Sāhib contains what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls an "ecology of knowledges" (2014: 188). Challenging and reframing the tyranny of abstract universals and singular narrations of truth, Gurū Nānak sought to create a coherent harmony (not a synthesis) of that "ecology of knowledges" as a critical resonance across them. This creative re-reading of traditions transcends any one epistemic structure and lays the foundation for a new *particular-particular* comparative frame that protects the voice and sovereignty of different communities, for the "communal is by definition pluriversal" (Mignolo 2012: 81). This conference will thus focus on the horizontal, inter-epistemic engagement within the Gurū Granth Sāhib with the aim to retrieve two inter-related and central forms of that experiential coherence: music (*rāg*) and Word (*shabad*).

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